
Setting priorities for an applied research agenda in a new university

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Key Words

A.R.T., Freelisting, Option Domain, Forum, International Development, Honduras, University, Community-based Research, Research Agenda, Priority Setting, Capacity Building, Participatory Action Research

Context

- In 2007, the National Autonomous University of Honduras started operations in Danlí, an eastern region of Honduras, with some 530 students.
- The university needed to define an applied research agenda that would support academic studies in agro-industries, nursing, and information management.
- Two SAS² workshops were organized to define and prioritize an applied research agenda and to build capacity in applied research methods relevant to academic courses.

Participants

20 UNAH professors and the University's Director.



Questions

- What is the right balance among Action, Research, and Training for UNAH?
- What are the thematic areas of research of greatest interest to professors?
- What is the nature of research options for UNAH?
- What factors should determine the priorities for an applied research agenda?

Tools

- A.R.T.
- Freelisting
- Option Domain

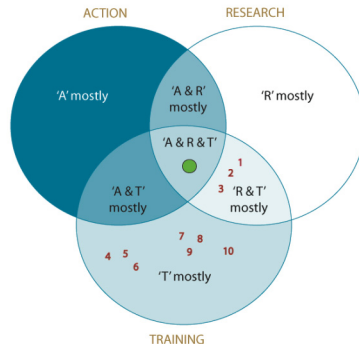
Example of Process Results

Step #1: Action, Research, Training (A.R.T.) was used to assess the balance and integration of three important aspects of university work:

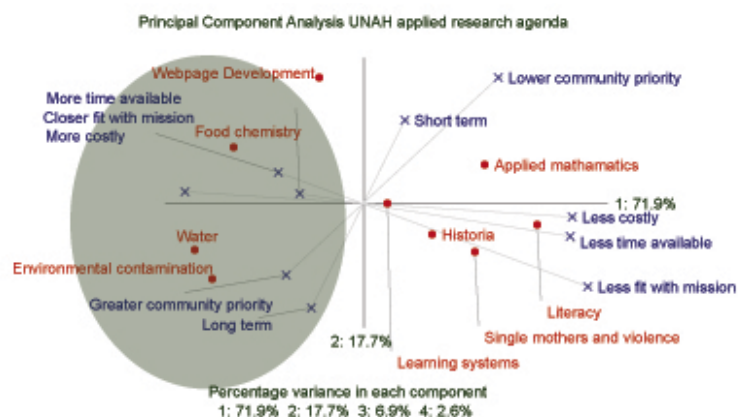
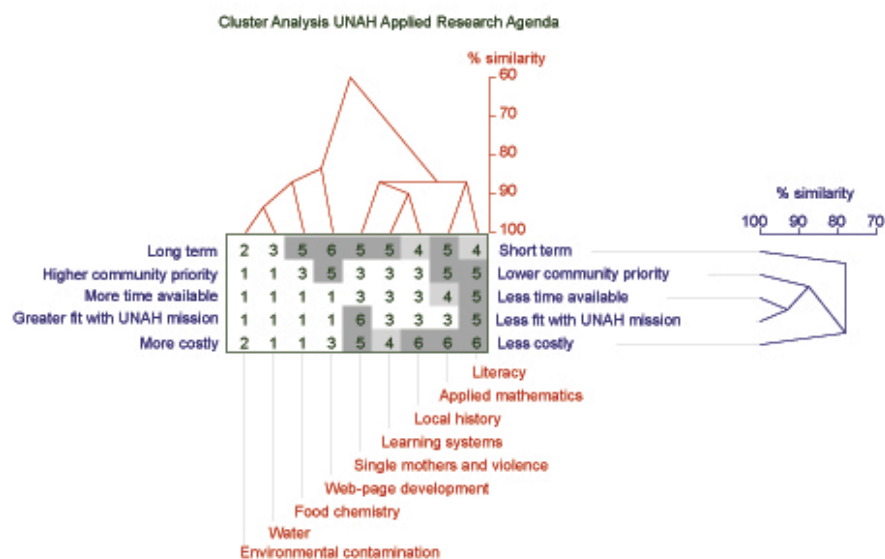
- **actions**, such as community extension, aimed at achieving community development goals,
- **research**, consisting of data collection and analysis, and
- **training**, involving teaching and other capacity-building strategies.

UNAH currently places great weight on training and teaching and wanted to combine these with community extension and research in ways that reinforce each other and help to address problems faced by communities near the university. ART set the stage for discussions on how to do this.

A.R.T. Profile of different university activities (1-10), and ideal profile



Step # 2: Freelisting and pile sorting were used to identify research areas that interest professors and that also relate to the problems faced by local communities. From 23 piles of related themes, participants identified five that were central to the applied research agenda and four of secondary interest. These priorities were based in part on the frequency with which the themes were mentioned.



Outcomes

- Participants identified groups of research themes and relevant criteria. Then, they were able to describe a potential applied research agenda based on objective criteria.
- Participatory tools relevant to applied research were modeled through the process. This gave professors new skills and ideas for collaborative classroom work and applied research.
- Using the tools led to greater understanding and agreement on the reasons why applied research is still weak at the university, and what might need to be done to strengthen it.

Contributions of SAS²

- Participants recognized the value of numbers as a way to generate dialogue.
- The tools offered support for participants to discuss and negotiate perspectives across different disciplines and within the same discipline.
- The tools offered support for critical reflection on the ideal balance and integration among action, research, and training.
- Visual presentations helped create enthusiasm about how data was generated and results were interpreted.
- The mix of simple and sophisticated software presentations of the results captured academic interest.